

Massachusetts Block
1525 Tower Avenue
City of Superior
Douglas County
Wisconsin

HABS No. WI-314

HABS
WIS
16-SUPR,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MASSACHUSETTS BLOCK

HABS No. WI-314

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16-SUPR,
1-

Location: 1525-31 Tower Ave., West Superior, Douglas County,
Wisconsin. Sixth Division, Block 164, Lots 19, 20, 21, and
22.

Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
15.568475.5174170.

Present Owner: Metro Credit Union, 25 Belknap St., Superior, WI 54880.

Present Occupant/
Use: Vacant.

Significance: The Massachusetts Block is one of eighteen commercial blocks
erected between 1888 and 1892 by the Land and River
Improvement Company of New Jersey. Designed by Carl Wirth,
the Massachusetts Block is a good example of low-rise
commercial construction, constructed in the downtown area of
Superior, Wisconsin, in 1889.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1889-1890.
2. Architect: Carl Wirth, Superior, Wisconsin (active 1888-1915).

Probably the most noteworthy and prominent of Superior's
architects was Carl Wirth. Wirth had come to Superior in 1888
from Duluth, where he had been working since 1880. Trained in the
romantic forms of the late nineteenth century, he was strongly
influenced by the Richardsonian Romanesque traditions and to a
lesser extent by the newly developing Chicago School. Originally
located in the Banks Block at 618 Tower Ave., Wirth quickly became
the most prominent of Superior's early architects. Associated
with the Land and River Improvement Company, Wirth obtained
impressive commissions from the firm, including the West Superior
Hotel, the Grand Opera House and the Wisconsin and Massachusetts
blocks. Designed with a strongly Richardsonian Romanesque flavor,
the buildings represented the start of the Land and River
Improvement Company's move to create a vibrant commercial center
along upper Tower Avenue.

In 1890, Wirth also received commissions for the Hammond Block and
the fashionable Roosevelt Terrace apartments of James Roosevelt.
In the Roosevelt apartments, one can see Wirth's strongest use of
Richardsonian Romanesque ornamentation and detailing. The solid

brick structure contains large amounts of elaborate sandstone trim. The Loring Terrace apartments at the corner of Ogden and N. 16th Street, which may have been Wirth's earliest project in the city, also showcase the architect's talent for imposing residential design.

The most impressive private residence designed by Wirth was his house for city attorney Frank Ross at 1708 Ogden Ave. The red brick residence features detailed sandstone trim and a corner tower.

His later commercial designs, such as the Empire Block (1892) and two buildings for the Keystone Investment Company at 6th and Ogden, show a more refined style. The 1892 Wemyss Block at 1301 Tower Ave., a design that merged a classical revival mode with refined Romanesque details, is also attributed to Wirth.

One of his last major works was the 1901 design of the Superior Public Library on Hammond Avenue. A neo-classical design, the building again employs a rich sandstone trim.

Wirth's office moved continually within the city, until Wirth eventually resettled in Duluth in 1916.¹

3. Original and subsequent owners:

1888 Lots 19 and 20 purchased by Josephine and Melanie Strong, daughters of William E. Strong, New York.

Lots 21 and 22 purchased by Land and River Improvement Co.

Building constructed on lots 19, 20, 21, and 22 by Land and River Improvement Co., and retained by them.

¹Most of the information on Wirth was obtained from city directories and various site-specific sources located in the clippings file of the Superior Public Library. As one of the city's most prominent architectural figures, the lack of any substantial biographical information on the man has been puzzling.

The only biographical information that could be located was his obituary in the Duluth Herald dated November 20, 1928, which noted: "Carl Wirth, age 74, of 13 W. Superior St., Duluth, died on Nov. 19, 1928, at St. Mary's Hospital after a short illness. Born in Germany, he arrived in Duluth in 1880 and began a career as an architect which included commissions for numerous commercial buildings in Duluth, Superior and the Dakotas. He is survived by his brothers Max and Adolf of Duluth."

- 1907 Land and River Improvement Co. was dissolved. Assets including Massachusetts Block and Lots 19, 20, 21, and 22 were purchased by Cashel Investment Company, a holding company of George G. Newton of Superior.
- 1916 Cashel sold building (not land) to Lottie and Edith Koon on a 45-year lease-purchase agreement, wherein Cashel, at the end of the land lease to the Koons, obtained clear title and ownership of land and building.
- 1941 Cashel obtained clear title to building and land due to tax title default.
- 1970 Van Vleck-Clemens Agency, Inc. (real estate), acquired property.
- 1978 Bill Dimitri (Vasilios G. Dimitrakopoulos) acquired property.
- 1982 Thomas O. Pierce acquired property.
- 1985 Soo Line Credit Union acquired property through a client defaulting on their mortgage.
- 1990 City of Superior acquired property.

4. Developer: Gen. John Henry Hammond.

John Henry Hammond was born June 30, 1833, in New York City and died in St. Paul, Minnesota, April 30, 1890. Hammond graduated from the University of Virginia with a degree in civil engineering. During the Civil War he served as Assistant Adjutant-General on the staff of General Sherman. After the Civil War he pursued his interests in development engineering and laid out the towns of Chillicothe, Ohio, and Clinton, Iowa, after which he was retained by the Manitoba and South Western Railroad and the Canadian Pacific Railway to develop properties in southern Canada.

It was during this period that Hammond traveled throughout the head of the lakes region of Duluth Minnesota, and Superior City, Wisconsin. He felt that this region offered great potential for a large city at the eastern terminus of a transcontinental railway and the western terminus of a transcontinental seaway.

Taking this proposal to a group of Eastern investors, he found financial backing for this proposal. With the backing of

individuals, railroad companies, and Eastern banks, the Land and River Improvement Company came into being in 1883.²

B. Historical Context:

The community of Superior, first platted in 1853,³ was a small, isolated port town settled by a group of St. Paul and Eastern investors. The early development in Superior took place in the area now known as the East End, along Superior Bay. The commercial center at that time existed only as clustered small structures of wood-frame construction. Beginning with the opening of the Soo Locks in 1854, and through early 1857, business continued to be extremely active; substantial numbers of residences were erected, new industries were starting or planned, and money and men came in from urban centers across the Midwest and East, promising a prosperous future. The failure of rail lines to reach the community and the nationwide financial panic of 1857, however, saw the townsite drop from a population of 2,500 to one of less than 500 in the space of a single year.⁴ The community of Superior quickly became a ghost town.

Paralyzed by the loss of the speculative investment capital that had been its early base, the townsite fell into an uneasy state of suspended animation that lasted until the 1880s, when with the continued expansion of trade in the upper Midwest and the growing realization of the commercial potential of the area at the head of the lakes, land speculators and developers began to take a more intense interest in the unplatted areas to the west of the original Superior settlement, along St. Louis Bay. This awakened interest was eventually manifested by the Land and River Improvement Company and its organizer, General John H. Hammond.

The Land and River Improvement Company was chartered in April 1883 by Hammond for the purpose of platting, incorporating and building the City of West Superior, Wisconsin. The original plat for West Superior consisted of approximately 4,000 acres of unclaimed land on the western side of the Superior Peninsula, which extended north into St. Louis and Superior bays. It was General Hammond's first option to redevelop the original Town of Superior City. However, he quickly found that most of the land was held by numerous owners in undivided interests. Due to the financial collapse in 1857, the clear title to the land was so muddled by the early 1880s that no amount of effort could have resurrected a

²Commemorative Biographical Record of the Upper Lake Region (Chicago: J. H. Beers and Company, 1905), 4-5.

³Frank A. Flower, Eye of the Northwest: First Annual Report of Superior, Wisconsin (Milwaukee: King, Fowle and Company, 1890), 28-32.

⁴Flower, 62.

unified land development. For this reason, General Hammond went to the other side of the peninsula where clear title to the land could be easily obtained. By 1883 he had secured title to 4,000 acres and chartered the Land and River Improvement Company for the purpose of establishing a commercial and manufacturing center at the head of Lake Superior.

The Land and River Improvement Company acted as the main catalyst for the growth and development of this untapped region and almost single-handedly determined the shape of the present downtown area. The earliest efforts of the firm were directed toward the establishment of railroads and industrial sites in the townsite. By 1889 the company had succeeded in helping to establish West Superior as a substantial commerce and manufacturing center with the erection of the West Superior Iron and Steel Company plant, the arrival of five separate railroad lines, and the establishment of numerous grain, flour, coal and lumber enterprises.

At this point, the Land and River Improvement Company, under the management of Rowland J. Wemyss,⁵ turned to the development of a major commercial and business center for the community and instituted a large-scale building program. With this new emphasis, the development of West Superior began to move from the waterfront to the unoccupied areas of Tower Avenue between present-day Broadway and Belknap Street. It is in this development period (1888-1892) that the Land and River Improvement Company left its most tangible imprint on the community.

In general, commercial development prior to this new effort was relegated to one- and two-story wood-frame or brick-veneered storefronts and offices, boardinghouses and worker hotels. The buildings, of which there are few survivors, represented the most basic of architectural treatments, designed more for utility and ease of erection than aesthetic reasons. The buildings of the "Boom Period" (as the years between 1888 and 1892 are known) in contrast were constructed in the most modern and substantial materials, styles and methods available. The architecture reflected the Eastern mentality of the investors in their attempt to create an urban center in the new Western frontier of northwestern Wisconsin. Their ultimate dream was the creation of a "new Chicago."

The first major construction project undertaken by the Land and River Improvement Company was that of the West Superior Hotel. Construction of the four-story solid brick structure was thought foolish by many. The building was located "way off in the woods" in an as-yet undeveloped

⁵No biographical information was found on Rowland J. Wemyss except for a listing in the 1889 Superior city directory stating that Wemyss was manager of the Land and River Improvement Company and resided in the West Superior Hotel.

area.⁶ But the building served to alert Eastern and regional businessmen and entrepreneurs to the investment potential of the area. Soon investment money under the control of the Land and River Improvement Company was flooding into the region.

In 1889, the two-story New Jersey Block at 1424 Tower was completed at the northeast corner of Belknap and Tower Avenue, directly across from the hotel.⁷ Constructed at a cost of \$50,000, the building contained numerous commercial concerns on the first floor and richly decorated office and residential quarters on the second. Built in brick and stone, the block along with its adjacent Grand Opera House (destroyed 1939) turned the isolated intersection into an energetic focal point for continued commercial development.

The completion of the New Jersey Block was quickly followed by the erection of the three-story Massachusetts and Watkins blocks. The Massachusetts Block at 1525 Tower Ave., made possible by Land and River Improvement Company directed investment, was a brick commercial and office structure designed in a Romanesque Revival manner. The building marked the southernmost extent of Tower Avenue development. The nearby Watkins Block, destroyed in 1956, was built by Francis Watkins and A. W. Stow at the corner of Tower Avenue and Belknap, completing the intersection. A third 1889 building, the Wisconsin Block, destroyed in 1979, was built through the action of the Land and River Improvement Company and Hobart Stocking of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, on the corner of Tower Avenue and Winter Street. Before the end of the year, Superior also saw the construction of the grandly arched Ritchie Block by early Superior landowner James S. Ritchie.⁸ Each new construction was a noteworthy achievement, not only establishing Tower Avenue as a sizable commercial district, but in the buildings' richness and articulation revealing a new maturity of architectural design in the downtown area. As the town prospered, its architecture evolved from the merely practical to the decidedly stylish. The impressive buildings constructed after 1888 demonstrated a permanence and professionalism of design, which reassured both citizens and interested investors of the stability of the new emerging city.

As noted in the Ritchie and Watkins blocks, the Land and River Improvement Company was not alone in its attempts to create and attract commercial development in the community. Small competing land-speculating companies were established in various areas of the city. The most visible was the Superior Improvement Company of Henry D. Minot, a Boston businessman with ties to the Great Northern Railroad. In 1889-

⁶Flower, 164.

⁷Evening Telegram (Superior, Wisconsin) February 5, 1934.

⁸Evening Telegram (Superior, Wisconsin) February 5, 1934.

90, Minot's improvement company attempted to wrestle the commercial district away from the Land and River Improvement Company's monopolistic domain by erecting the Trade and Commerce Building at 914 Hammond Ave., on the northeast corner of Hammond Avenue and Broadway. The building, a massive rusticated stone Richardsonian office structure, later became the city hall building. Minot's Superior Improvement Company also succeeded in building a large hotel, the Broadway, diagonally across from the Trade and Commerce Building. Extraordinarily fine buildings and profitable commercial ventures, the work of the Superior Improvement Company failed in its ultimate goal due in part to the untimely death of Minot and the continued building program of the Land and River Improvement Company, which picked up speed in the 1890s.

The Land and River Improvement Company continued its investment and building operations in early 1890 with the erection of commercial/office blocks at 1402 Tower Ave. and 1517 Tower Ave., referred to locally as the New York and Washington blocks. The Romanesque Revival New York Block with its ten ground-floor storefronts was built for \$100,000 and its stores were fully occupied within the year. The Washington Block, built in cooperation with W. H. Folsom of New York, housed offices for a number of important commercial firms operating in the port city, including the Northwest Hanna Coal Company.

During 1890 and 1891, several Land and River Improvement Company agents carried out speculative commercial construction on their own behalf. Ogden Hammond, the son of John Hammond, built the four-story Romanesque-detailed Hammond Block on the northwest corner of Winter and Tower Avenue. Ravaged by fire and unsympathetic alterations, the two-story structure now represents only a shadow of its former status. Francis Weeks of New York, acting president of the Land and River Company at the time, created plans for the construction of an eight-story commercial and office block at Broadway and Tower Avenue. His plans were realized as the two-story Berkshire Block, 917 Tower Ave. The unstable financial situation that soon gripped the region did not allow his eight-story giant to be built.

In the East End of the city, the Northern Improvement Company was established by local investors and succeeded in erecting the two-story Northern Block, 2239 E. 5th St., in 1892 within the growing commercial area located along East 5th Street. A year earlier Abram G. Descent had succeeded in erecting the \$32,000 Descent Block, 505 22nd Ave. East. Also erected in the area was the Euclid Hotel. Unfortunately, large-scale development in that area of the city never achieved the great success of the Tower Avenue area, and the East End remained only a minor secondary commercial center.

The year 1892 proved to be the strongest for commercial speculation and investment in the downtown area and, unknowingly, the last. A number of earlier structures were completed and opened, and the largest of the Land and River Improvement Company's projects were initiated. Among the

buildings erected in the year were the Maryland Block, later to become the home of the influential Superior Evening Telegram; and the Wemyss Building, built by Land and River Improvement Company manager Rowland Wemyss. These two were located on opposite corners of the intersection of Tower Avenue and 13th Street. Located a block to the north, on the east side of Tower Avenue, was the substantial Empire Block, 1202 Tower Ave., erected in 1892 for the Empire Building Company headed by Franklin Billings and Edward Bailey. The three-story Romanesque-style building was designed by local architect Carl Wirth.

By far the most imposing structure to be erected in the new commercial district along Tower Avenue during the boom period was the Land and River Improvement Company's Minnesota Block (1892), located at 1507 Tower Ave., on the last vacant corner of Tower Avenue and Belknap Street. Designed by architect C. C. Haight of Minneapolis, the four-story brick block was to be the central office headquarters for the Land and River Improvement Company as well as the West Superior Iron and Steel Company. The two lower floors of the 130' x 150' building were occupied by the Spicer-Fanning Dry Goods store, the city's largest such concern throughout most of the late nineteenth century. In 1894 the block was renamed the Board of Trade Building, becoming the business center of commerce and trade within the port.

By 1892, the community of Superior was recognized by many as the "Second City of Wisconsin." In the short span of ten years since the arrival of the first railroad into the city, the community had grown to a population upwards of 34,000. The year 1892, however, was to be the last for major commercial construction within the center of the city. The glory of "Boom Era" speculation and prosperity would once more see the dark specter of gloom as the nationwide financial crisis of 1893 brought the city's growth to a sudden halt. Commercial development which had seen massive business blocks erected in the major business centers of the community abruptly ceased; industrial concerns closed their doors; and speculative investments as a whole simply stopped. The age of the huge, monolithic commercial blocks was over in the community. The simple lack of funds and the hesitancy of investors to invest further in speculative enterprises meant that construction within the community returned to a smaller, more functionally dictated, scale. The Land and River Improvement Company, severely shaken by the depression, turned its efforts toward smaller-scale projects, particularly the development of the residential area, while a number of the smaller land-speculating firms were forced to liquidate their holdings in the community.

Although the community's dreams of rivaling Chicago fell by the wayside with the depression, the city had given itself a strong foundation. During the last years of the nineteenth century and through the early twentieth century the scale of construction within the central commercial district was typified by small, economically designed structures that were erected to meet the immediate needs of their

sponsors, leaving the Boom Period commercial blocks as the commanding focal points of the downtown area.

The work of the Land and River Improvement Company and the hosts of other smaller speculative agents from 1888 to 1892 had succeeded in creating in Superior the heart of an urban-scaled commercial district that controlled the workings of a massive port and the prosperous community around it. The efforts of those groups not only represented the first extensive use of skilled craftsmen and expensive materials, but also brought the first extensive involvement of professional architects, whose work reflected the reigning styles and technology of the period.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Massachusetts Block is typical of brick Romanesque Revival commercial buildings, using rough-cut sandstone accents and round-headed arches along the upper floors.
2. Condition of fabric: good. Entrance to the upper-floor apartments was gained through two hand-cut sandstone arched doorways, since removed. The ground-floor storefronts have all been altered with modern infill panels and entranceways. In general the integrity of the exterior of the building on the upper floors remains intact. The extensive removal and remodeling of the residence areas from the original eight apartments to a hospital and finally to fourteen living units has left little of the original interior remaining.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The Massachusetts Block is three stories with a basement, divided in half, front to rear, by a common party wall. Its front is divided into eight bays, divided by pilasters. There were four first-floor store units.
2. Foundation: Coursed stone rubble of locally quarried sandstone. Stones surrounding doorways through the wall are hand-tooled and squared.
3. Walls: Pressed brick veneer with sandstone trim. On the front, the second and third stories remain virtually intact, with the front divided into eight individual bays, each of which contains paired windows. Separating the bays are two-story brick pilasters, capped with native Lake Superior sandstone. The

pilasters support a continuous series of sixteen semicircular arches of heavily corbeled brick.

The south side employs the same decorative touches as the front but in a slightly different arrangement. Two-story pilasters separate the two end bays from the main block. The end bays project slightly. On the third floor the windows in the end bays are triple, with corbeled-brick round arches, while on the main block the five windows have plain round arches. At the second level, continuous stone lintels top the flat-arched windows. Some of the windows in the end bays at both levels are blind. At the first level, the storefront wraps around to the depth of the first end bay. Four high square windows comprise the rest of the fenestration at this level.

The rear (west side) is faced with common brick; windows and doors alternate, providing access to the rear porches.

4. Structural system: Exterior bearing walls and interior party wall of brick.
5. Porches: The original three-story wood porch and fire escape system in the rear has been replaced with a modern steel unit.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The two original Romanesque Revival cut-sandstone arched entranceways and four ground-floor storefronts were replaced in the early 1900s with modern commercial-style infill paneling, cast-iron supports and prism-glass transoms. These have been removed.
 - b. Windows: The second-floor windows are paired and surmounted, within each bay, by a sandstone lintel. The windows have double-hung sash, topped by transom windows. The third-floor windows are paired and round-arched. The windows have double-hung sash, topped by round-arched transom windows.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Flat rolled roof pitching 5/8 to 12 front to rear, supported by wood rafters and tin flashed to the exterior walls. Roof divided front to rear by central brick fire wall approximately 36" high.
 - b. Cornice: A small bracketed galvanized-iron cornice sits above a denticulated sandstone cornice on the front and south-side walls.

- c. Skylights: Each of the four major bays of the building has an integral central light court extending from a glassed-roof penthouse to the first floor (since sealed and decked at each floor to provide additional usable floor space).

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plan: The retail bays were open front to rear. Each commercial space was provided with separate access to the basement via an internal stairwell and a rear exterior stairwell. A common fireproof brick boiler room was attached and located at the rear of the building.

Dividing each pair of retail bays on the first-floor front is a central entrance hall with a stairway leading to a second-floor apartment foyer, and another stairway to the third floor. The apartments--two per floor per stairway, for a total of eight--contained three bedrooms and bath located off a central corridor running to the rear of the building. The light shaft vented and lit the hall, one bedroom, and dining room. The front two rooms were living and sitting rooms separated by pine raised panel doors. Separating the dining room and kitchen from the living room and sitting room was a doorway and a half wall below some form of decorative glass.

- 2. Stairways: The stairways had plain oak risers and treads. The stairwells had wainscots of simple beaded yellow pine and had turned wooden balusters.
- 3. Flooring: Pine tongue-and-groove flooring throughout. Bathrooms were tiled in linoleum over pine board.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finishes: The upper-floor hallways, foyers and stairwells had simple yellow pine wainscots. Plastered walls were painted in service and access areas, wallpapered in living and sleeping areas. The first-floor walls were painted, with ceilings made of pressed tin (since removed).
- 5. Doors and windows: All first-floor doors and windows have been removed, remodeled and replaced. On the upper floors, pine raised-panel sash doors with single-pane frosted-glass lights were used for apartment entrance and hall end doors. Hall secondary doors were standard raised six-panel pine doors. Frames contained a working transom window above each door. The trim was pine with bull's-eye corner blocks.
- 6. Furnishings: Each living or sleeping room was supplied with a pine corner closet.

7. Heating, lighting, plumbing:

- a. Heating: The building shared a common coal-fired steam heat plant with individually controlled radiators in each room. Original decorative cast-iron and steel-tube radiators remain.
- b. Lighting: Original gas-and-electric lighting was removed and converted to incandescent in the upper floors, fluorescent in the first-floor retail bays. One gas-and-electric wall sconce remains on a third-floor landing.
- c. Plumbing: All original plumbing fixtures have been replaced and bathrooms extensively remodeled. The same is true of kitchen areas.

D. Site:

The Massachusetts Block faces east on the 1500 block of Tower Avenue. On the north is the Washington Block at 1517-1523 Tower Ave. and the Minnesota Block at 1501-1511 Tower Ave. To the east was the West Superior Hotel (burned 1947), now the site of Super One Grocery.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Unpublished Sources:

Abstract of Title to "Lots Nineteen (19), Twenty (20), Twenty-one (21) and Twenty-two (22), Block One Hundred Sixty-four (164), West Superior, Sixth Division, in the City of Superior, Douglas County, Wisconsin," No. X3864-X3865, Superior Abstract and Title Company, 1406 Belknap St., Superior, WI.

B. Newspapers:

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(RE: George G. Newton)

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C. Bibliography:

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PROJECT INFORMATION

Plans call for the demolition of the Massachusetts Block in spring 1990 by Letourneau & Sons as agents of the City of Superior. The site is to be used for a new senior-citizen center. The project meets all recommendations of the State Historical Society and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation per memorandum of agreement dated December 27, 1989. This report was prepared by Paul R. Lusignan, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, and Thomas Hendrickson, Museum Director, City of Superior, Superior, Wisconsin.